

# Educating Diana

## Renewing Women's Hunting Heritage

Story and photos by John Shtogren

**M**en hunt, women don't—pure and simple. Everybody knows that, right? After all, it's biological: Men are driven by the “hunting imperative,” the age-old blood drive to go out and bring home the bacon. Women don't want to get involved in such a brutish activity as hunting. Besides, they've got the “nesting imperative,” the overwhelming desire to keep the hearth clean and the cooking fire burning until their hunters are home from the hill. It's always been that way, right?

### Woman the Hunter

Mary Zeisse Strange, Skidmore professor and author of *Woman the Hunter*, would probably roll her eyes, if not gag outright, if she read that opening paragraph. It is the kind of self-serving sentiment that furthers the agendas of male-centric historians as well as radical eco-feminists who see hunting as vile, violent and particularly male. In her book, Strange points out that both groups, as much as they disagree as to who's on top, do agree that women have no blood ties to the natural world. However, Strange reminds us that Diana was the Roman goddess of *fertility and the hunt*. As she sees it, women have always had two roles, nurturer in the home and hunter in the field, but their hunting role has been obscured overtime.

According to Strange, women have lost sight of their hunting heritage because of historical bias and misguided political correctness. She asks herself with



Sarah Bell gets a shooting tip from Shady Grove's Rob Farmer.

no small note of melancholy, “Where I wonder did I lose my lineage from Diana?” A good question no doubt, but perhaps an even better one is this: *How do I get it back?*

### Educating Diana

Education is the answer, the “how” of renewing women's hunting heritage, for the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. For over a decade VDGIF has been building a women's outdoors program. It began in 1995 with the

nationally acclaimed program called “Becoming an Outdoors Woman,” or BOW for short. During the three-day workshop, women learn subjects and skills that probably are very foreign to most of them: shotgun and rifle shooting, hunting techniques, camping, wilderness survival, outdoor cooking and more. Subsequently, VDGIF expanded its learning opportunities for women to include both short courses for novices who want just a “toe dipping” outdoors experience as well as in-depth workshops designed to raise partici-

VDGIF instructors Jesse Ebron (l) and Rick Layser (r) demonstrate gun safety.

Photo courtesy of VDGIF



pants' understanding and skills well above beginner levels.

Currently, VDGIF continues to present BOW and has added a complementary three-day "Mothers and Daughters Outdoors" weekend. It covers many of the same subjects as BOW but offers a unique generational bonding experience as the title indicates. Family bonding in the outdoors is also an important element of "Virginia Outdoors Weekend," which gives the entire family a chance to learn outdoor skills associated with hunting and many other outdoor pursuits. VDGIF also offers day-long workshops in hunting squirrel, dove, turkey, deer, waterfowl and upland game. Many of these workshops are co-sponsored with organizations such as the Wild Turkey Federation or privately owned hunting preserves.

At the heart of VDGIF's education program is its group of volunteer instructors. Over 1,000 individuals have been carefully selected and trained to convey their hunting and outdoor expertise to women and other novices. They are all enthusiastic and knowledgeable and strive to create a safe and supportive learning environment. In their other lives the instructors are doctors, business professionals, lawyers, educators and law enforcement officers—individuals who may have little in common professionally but who share a passion for their hunting heritage and a desire to pass it on to others. "Without them we couldn't begin to offer what we do," says an appreciative Karen Holson, VDGIF Program Development Coordinator.

### **Pheasant Hunting Workshop at Shady Grove**

On a blustery day in February, VDGIF offered a Pheasant Hunting Workshop for women at the 500-acre Shady Grove Hunting Preserve 45 miles southwest of Washington, DC. Eight women from around the state braved the

**Linda Crouch takes aim.**



**VDGIF Instructor Phil Townley and Linda show off her pheasant.**

weather and joined with the instructor staff in the meeting room above the old barn. With the staff outnumbering the participants two-to-one, which is VDGIF's planned instructor-student ratio, it was a full house.

Who were these women? There is no simple answer, no standard profile, no "girls with guns" stereotype. "Diverse" is a good word to describe them: a teenager with her Dad in tow, an electronics business executive, three friends who partici-

pate in fishing tournaments for breast cancer awareness, a TV broadcaster, one spouse trying to understand another spouse's passion—not a mix that would have been easy to predict.

Each woman had done her homework before arriving. Virginia has a mandatory Hunter Education Course that each first-time hunter must complete before he or she can legally take a gun into the field. The women could have taken the 10-hour course at one of the many class-



**One group at the end of the workshop--VDGIF staff standing, hunters kneeling with their pheasants. (Photo courtesy of VDGIF)**

room locations around the state or through a home-study option that would have been completed that morning with hands-on instruction. Such an option is an example of VDGIF's commitment to removing barriers between the public and the outdoors. "We'll do whatever it takes to eliminate barriers, whether they're financial, physical, language or the kind of time constraints we all face in our busy lives," says Jimmy Mootz, Outreach Coordinator.

### **From Classroom to Pheasant Field**

The workshop day was split into three parts, the first two in the morning and the third in the afternoon: 1, classroom instruction with an emphasis on firearms safety; 2, shooting skills development on the sporting clays range; and 3, hunting skills development in the pheasant fields. It was an ambitious plan: taking women who may never have shouldered a shotgun before and helping them to become accomplished hunters by the end of the day. No mean feat by a long shot.

*Classroom.* The participants' anxiety level

was topping out when the class began. (*What if I can't do it, or it hurts when I shoot, or I miss, or, or, or...?*) Gradually, however, their worries lessened and their confidence grew as they learned how to safely load and unload a shotgun, how to keep safe by controlling the gun muzzle and knowing the safe zone of fire, and the importance of the "Don't Shoot-Shoot" command. VDGIF instructors are masters at stressing safety while at the same time creating a relaxed, supportive and non-threatening learning environment. By the end of two hours in the classroom, the women knew that no matter what, they were going to have a fine day together.

*Shooting skills.* Each participant was paired with an instructor, and the two would stay close together for the rest of the day. The instructor was never more than an arm's length away when the participant was in a live-fire position on the range or in the field, always there for her guidance and support. The 20-mile-an-hour wind gusts on the range that day would have tested any shooter's skills and discouraged

more than a few. But together the women persevered and overcame the challenge. When a shooter missed, they clapped and shouted words of praise and encouragement for a good try. When a shooter smoked a target, they clapped and shouted words of praise and encouragement, only much louder. "All for one and one for all" became the tone of the day. When they headed for lunch they were much farther along to becoming hunters than they had been when they had stepped on the range only a few hours earlier.

*The pheasant field.* Over lunch a VDGIF wildlife biologist talked to the group about pheasant ecology, their history, habitat and behavior. An important part of hunting the right way is having a respect for your quarry that comes from an intimate understanding of its personal life. When it came time to head for the field, the participants had a greater appreciation of what they were going after.

As they moved out they were split into two smaller groups of hunters, instructors and Shady Grove dog handlers. Pheasants had been planted in thick ground cover in the fields before the women arrived. Each hunter would have the opportunity to shoot at two pheasants. Hitting them was another matter. Shady Grove has fast-flying birds, which would be made even faster by a 20-mile-an-hour tail wind. Each group moved into the field like a small safari—dog and handler, followed by shooter and instructor, followed by the other unarmed hunters, all lined up single file directly behind the shooter and safely out of the zone of fire.

When the dog locked up on a pheasant holding tight in the cover, the shooter and instructor moved slowly forward, the instructor's hand resting gently on the shooter's shoulder. "Steady, steady...." The gallery followed in lock step. By the time the pheasant burst skyward, and the instructor gave the "Shoot!" command, there was enough adrenaline in

the immediate area to resuscitate a mastodon. When a bird was missed, there was a spontaneous outburst of, "It's ok, it's ok, it's ok, you'll get the next one!" When a bird was downed, the group's exuberance was instantaneous. They might well have been dancing on the Serengeti Plain in the shadow of Mount Kilimanjaro.

*Just before dark.* How did they do? In a word, terrific! Eight hunters came back with 10 pheasants. All but one of the hunters downed at least one bird. (Men with years of pheasant experience would have been happy with that tally.) After all the pheasants were cleaned and packaged and ready to go, the women made sure that every one of their merry band, including the hunter who had missed, was heading home from the hill with a bird in hand and a recipe for pheasant in mushroom cream sauce in a VDGIF tote bag. The next night eight lucky guys around Virginia would be guests at a very special pheasant feast.

### Postscript

My five decades as a hunter has been a long story of men without women. I did not ever, not even once, hunt in the company of women. As I headed home after the Pheasant Hunting Workshop, I asked myself a personal question: Would I really ever want to hunt with any of these women? The answer came easily: Yes, absolutely. At the end of a single day, I saw clearly that they had the right stuff, and we shared the same heritage.

### Diana Home Study

There are a variety of resources available that I truly hope women will use to learn more about Diana's legacy. From Virginia to the Kalahari, hunting cultures are under threat. We need more hunters, especially women, to keep our heritage alive.

Visit the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries to check out Outdoor Education and Upcoming Events:

[www.dgif.virginia.gov](http://www.dgif.virginia.gov). For more personalized information, call Karen Holson or Jimmy Mootz at (804) 367-1000.

The "Women on Target" program sponsored by the National Rifle Association presents hunting and shooting opportunities for women in Virginia and around the country. Visit [www.nrahq.org](http://www.nrahq.org).

Two websites concerned with women and hunting are Women Hunters ([www.womenhunters.com](http://www.womenhunters.com)) and Women Outdoors ([www.women-outdoors.com](http://www.women-outdoors.com)).

If you're ready for book-length resources, try these:

*Woman the Hunter* by Mary Zeisse Strange mentioned at the beginning of this article (Beacon Books, 1998). Also by Strange: *Heart Shots: Women Write About Hunting* (Stackpole Books, 2004).

*Is She Coming Too? Memoirs of a Lady Hunter* by Frances Hamerstrom (Iowa State University Press, 1987).

*Becoming an Outdoors Woman* by Christine L. Thomas (Falcon Press, 1997).

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The author is an outdoorsman, farmer and international management consultant whose travels often take him to the far edges and borderlands. He welcomes comments at [jshtogren@cs.com](mailto:jshtogren@cs.com).

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**Greg Leffler, Agent**  
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